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Reformed Defense of Literature: An Apology for Literature's Place in Christian Higher Education

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A Reformed Defense of Literature:

An Apology for Literature's Place in Christian Higher Education



by Mary J. Dengler

Over the years, students and faculty have asked why literature should be a required course and how to approach it as a Christian. These questions, along with program reviews, curriculum debates, and my own sense of calling, have forced me to defend literature's place in the Christian-college core curriculum. As a student, I didn't think literature needed a defense, and I didn't think much about calling. I just loved to discuss and write

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about literature, and I thought that teaching others how to do the same was important. Later, when I realized that we are called to worship God in all of life, that Christ is Lord of writing and theory, that our every action is an obedient or disobedient response to God's laws (Walsh/Middleton 67), I recognized the importance of what I was doing and of how I was doing it. God's call—to worship and obey him; to gain wisdom; to understand creation (including structures of literary form, theory, and language); to disciple students in truth through literature; and to respond in truthfully aesthetic ways—has prompted me to defend literature as a core requirement of Christian education, based on five considerations.

I. Special Revelation

As scripture depicts the creation, fall, and redemption account (considered the “pillar points” of Kuyper's Calvinist Christian worldview [Naugle 22]), its grand narrative establishes the pattern of reality recognizable in literature. Old Testament writers give us narratives of human origin. We see God creating humans in His image, endowing them with his capacities of self-consciousness, reason, aesthetic awareness, etc. (as described by Basden, writing of Dooyeweerd's cosmonomic philosophy), and assigning them the work of governing and developing His creation. We see humanity at its zenith. Then we watch it plunge to guilt, confusion, and mutual alienation through *hubris* (God-defying pride) that leads to error (defying

God's laws). We see the subsequent blaming, rationalizing, lawlessness, and longing for restoration or transcendence. At the same time, we see God's work of redemption, providing a way back—from lawlessness and separation—with covenants that work through obedience to laws and sacrifices (explained in Walsh/Middleton's *The Transforming Vision*, Ch. 5). Into that pattern come leaders, judges, kings, and prophets, their work culminating in

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the promised Messiah, humanity's un-heroic hero. New Testament writers continue the redemption story, with narratives of Christ, the Church, and the apocalyptic vision.

As these Testaments depict, through a series of narrators, the Divine author's grand narrative of falling humanity and God's grace, not only do they establish or validate a structural pattern for literature, with a beginning, middle, and end; but they also suggest God's use of literary structure and language to convey truth while providing models for literary obedience. These include the narrative (of Genesis, Joshua, Judges), epic (Exodus and the wilderness journey ending in the occupation of Canaan), tragicomedy (Job), letter (the Epistles), and vision (Revelation), as well as the power of metaphor, repetition, and parallel structure (in the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon). As a conveyer of truth and model for our responses, then, literature comes to us, according to Christian philosopher and art critic Calvin Seerveld, as "a crux of education" (106) and "a gift of the Holy Spirit" (153).

II. Obedience to the Creation Mandate

The very composing of literature (biblical/non-biblical) suggests obedience to God's first command to his newly created image-bearers: to "fill the earth," "subdue it," and "Rule over it" (Gen. 3:28, 29). The historical development of literary structure (from tale to epic to tragedy and comedy to prose romance to picaresque to novella to novel and short story, etc), each reflecting, critiquing, and shaping its culture, testifies to humanity's unwitting obedience. Christian writers, literary critics, and professors, whose vision has been cleared by the Holy Spirit, can consciously inform their work with truth.

Calvin Seerveld correctly calls literary writing "worship" (like all other human activity), in its obedient or disobedient response to the writer's Creator. The "object" of that worship "shows up most quickly in literature," according to Seerveld, "not only because narrative is probably more definite than systems of tones, colors, or architectural forms but also because the omniscient storyteller ...can interpolate a comment on a scene or throw in a calculated aside...[which] lets the author of a novel show his hand more readily without obtruding artistically"; this show of hand Seerveld calls "tell-tale embellishments" (110). These "tell-tale embellishments" could also be considered examples of God's grace. For example, Melville's narrator says of Billy Budd's stutter, "In this particular Billy was a striking instance that the arch interferer, the envious marplot of Eden still has more or less to do with every human consignment to this planet of earth" (qtd. in Seerveld 110).

A literature course shows students how literature is worship, what god is being worshiped, what truths are being revealed, through what means, and how to recognize untruths. For example, in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams dramatizes a Darwinist approach to life, with his backdrop of jungle imagery, his predatory acts and images, and Stella's choice of rapist Stanley over sister Blanche for survival. It is true that people betray their conscience to serve themselves; it is also true that people willingly accept the lie that they live in a Godless, predatory world, since it allows them to destroy the weaker or sur-

render to the stronger for survival. Blanche sacrifices her sanity and life to dispute that lie.

Literary cultural obedience is evident in literary structure and development, from the Classical Age to the present, demonstrating God's "common grace" to a fallen world (Kuyper 123). The Classical Greek writers questioned cultural beliefs in the light of their own beliefs as they unwittingly obeyed the creation mandate through new literary forms. Epic poet Homer, narrating Achilles' obedience of Athena and self-recriminating grief over Patroklos, in *The Iliad*, suggests his belief that the gods exist, that human well-being consists in serving the gods, and that humans bear responsibility for their actions. Homer too inserts a tell-tale embellishment on the consequences of following pride over wisdom when his narrator comments, "The Trojans roared assent/lost in folly. Athena had swept away their senses./They gave applause to Hector's ruinous tactics, none to Polydamas, who gave them sound advice" (18.361-364).

While Homer's epics led eighth-century B.C.E. Greeks out of dark ages to a renaissance of literacy through a national, religious, and rhetorical sense of themselves (Mack et al 107-108), Sophocles' tragedies forced Greeks to question sophistry's effects in the fifth-century B.C.E. intellectual revolution, to consider the possibility that skepticism toward either moral absolutes or human responsibility does not cancel either. Oedipus recognizes his depravity as a "sickness to the core" in spite of his princely appearance (lines 1528-29). Sophocles adds his own tell-tale embellishment when the chorus states, "If all such violence goes with honor now / why join the sacred dance?.../ Nowhere Apollo's golden glory now—the gods, the gods go down" (983-84; 996-97).

Euripedes' *Medea* goes further in urging moral integrity, suggesting that a husband's marital unfaithfulness invites chaos. After Medea attributes her children's murders to Jason's broken wedding vows, Euripedes allows Medea to escape in Helios' chariot to suggest that if the gods *are* morally neutral, humans had better make and keep their own moral laws for society's survival. He adds the tell-tale embellishment of the chorus's response to Medea's planned revenge on an unfaithful husband, suggesting a disordered world:

Flow backward to your sources, sacred rivers,
And let the world's great order be reversed.
It is the thoughts of men that are deceitful,
Their pledges that are loose.
Story shall now turn my condition to a fair one,
Women are paid their due.
No more shall evil-sounding fame be theirs.
(lines 407-413)

Medieval writers, obeying the creation mandate, moved the epic to romance in depicting evil's deceptiveness. Here, merely human heroes enter contests with beings that intend to dismantle their faith instead of their heads. Romance heroes, like epic heroes, still descend to an underworld, but in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, this underworld may be an illusionary castle or green valley of temptation that brings the hero to sin, humility, confession, and penance for temporal and eternal salvation. The Gawain poet uses the green man and the holly bob as a throwback to the pre-Christian, druidical nature gods, to whom pentangle-bearing Gawain fearfully turns for protection. We hear the writer's tell-tale embellishment in Arthur's demand that all wear the green belt "for his sake" (101. 2504). Even though all the knights wear the belt to honor Gawain, they also declare their common flaw of spiritual doubt.

Renaissance writers, who further developed tragedy and introduced the picaresque novel, reflect the transition from medieval faith to intellectual audacity and materialistic realism through characters caught in the threshold of faith and doubt. Reflecting and challenging Renaissance audacity, Christopher Marlowe shows that only after Faustus renounces God for intellectual deity does he recognize the dependence of intellectual growth on the knowledge of God. Faustus, who, like Adam, is tempted by immediate power and knowledge through Lucifer, finds himself short-changed, as he degenerates from renowned scholar to court magician (able to fetch grapes in winter) to prankster (able to remove his leg and turn his horse to straw). Facing death, he longs for redemption and transcendence but finds he has lost the capacity to repent. His being torn by devils and taken to hell suggests Marlowe's warning against Godless, or lawless, short-cuts to intellectual/material suc-

cess. Similarly, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, only after Hamlet kills the wrong man (in an attempt to determine the fate of Claudius' soul) and successfully escapes Claudius' execution plot, is he able to recognize the supremacy of God's providence. Shakespeare uses the tell-tale embellishment of Hamlet's admitting a "destiny that shapes our ends / Rough-hew them how we will" (5.2.10, 11).

Cervantes, too, uses a tell-tale embellishment while developing the form of the picaresque novel. Sancho Panza's expressions of grief over Don Quixote's dying confession allows readers to sense the tragedy, or fall, of Western culture from spiritual and moral ideals expressed in imaginative writing to materialism and dismissal of romance in realism. Cleverly, Cervantes blends romanticism and realism in this work of imaginative writing, for example, when Sancho Panza says to the dying, regenerate, and sane Quixote, "get up from this bed and let us go out into the fields clad as shepherds as we agreed to do. Who knows but behind some bush we may come upon the Lady Dulcinea, as disenchanted as you could wish" (1954). Here he suggests that they can still play the idealistic, imaginative shepherd game while pursuing truth.

This blend of romance and realism continued with the novel's development. Emerging with the rise of the commoners, who lacked guidance in largely unchurched industrial areas and responded to a narrative voice, eighteenth-century novelists obeyed the creation mandate by developing first epistolary novels, then narrative voices to guide readers in a changing culture. In epistolary novels, tell-tale embellishments include the correspondents' comments on characters, their silences, and the contradictions between what the reported characters said and what they did. Through correspondence between Mr. Andrews and daughter Pamela, in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, Pamela not only maintains the virtue needed to conquer and reform the gentry but also shows through her responses to her would-be seducer, Squire B, how a clever Christian young lady should act. Richardson, speaking through writer/narrator Mr. Andrews, can guide his audience away from the ignorant follies of Moll Flanders, who lacked patriarchal guidance (though her confession, repentance, and turn to Christianity led to a successful life of

entrepreneurship and, eventually, to a stable marriage). Without a father's guidance in Richardson's *Clarissa*, the heroine is quickly victimized by her predator, as Richardson validates the guidance of both fathers and novels. Similarly, through correspondence with foster-father Rev. Villars, Evelina, in Frances Burney's *Evelina*, makes the kinds of judgments and character evaluations that distinguish the true Christian gentleman from a troop of predators.

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In the early nineteenth century, Jane Austen not only developed the narrative voice but used it, along with dialogue, in her drawing-room novels to alert readers to marriage and parenting flaws of both gentry and commoners and to suggest the basis for a better marriage. Austen's character dialogues, with narrative intrusions and silences, suggest Elizabeth Bennett's and Mr. Darcy's errors in judgment, their fall to painful awareness, their redemption through suffering and confession (and, in Mr. Darcy's case, moral and financial action), and the happiness produced when a partnership transcends the boundaries of wealth, position, and conventional conversation. Her relationship with Mr. Darcy reaches a higher level of mutual understanding than that of Jane Bennet with Mr. Bingley, Mrs. Bennet with Mr. Bennet, Lydia Bennet with Mr. Wickham, or Charlotte with Mr. Collins, as Jane and Mr. Darcy recognize their equality of error, contrition, worth, and dialogue.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* takes both novel form and cultural awareness to a higher level through the first-person narrator. Jane's nar-

rated inner struggles, her guiding “light,” Mrs. Rochester’s plight, the novel’s parallel structure (three cousin siblings at the beginning and end), and the tell-tale embellishment of Mr. Rochester’s confession and profession of faith (Brontë 395) suggest the need of self-control and self-discipline in light of God’s laws (Brontë 279), human dependence on God’s providence (285), and the misery that comes in abandoning God’s laws, as admitted in Rochester’s repentance (393), or denying love, as recognized by Jane in the kind of marriage offered by St. John Rivers (359).

Dickens’ *Hard Times* develops the novel of social realism, using both allegory and caricatures to redirect middle-class culture from dehumanizing Utilitarianism and Materialism to a more humane and complex approach to child-rearing, education, and industry. Tell-tale embellishments of polluted Coketown (Boulderby’s example of progress), his reference to the factory workers as “Hands,” and the absurdity of expecting these dehumanized people to attend the churches constructed by their factory owners suggest the contradictions that such philosophies produce.

George Eliot, who carries the novel (through form/structure) and culture to higher levels of social and philosophical awareness, uses the metaphors of evangelical Christianity to represent the necessity of obeying moral laws for a productive life. In *Adam Bede*, she traces the effects of cultural change on gentry and commoners through several interwoven plots and dialogue. In particular, Eliot contrasts the lives and effects of Hetty Sorrel and Dinah Morris: the first is self-absorbed and ignorant in her devotion to cultural norms of femininity and success at the expense of morality; the other is self-denying and wise in her concern for others and her moral approach to life. Rev. Mr. Irwine’s words serve as a tell-tale embellishment to suggest the destructive refusal of adhering to natural laws in making self-serving choices. As Mr. Irwine says to Arthur Donnithorne, who lacks the courage to confess or break his involvement with Hetty Sorrell, “Our deeds carry their terrible consequences..., consequences that are hardly ever confined to ourselves” (Eliot 217). In this work, as well as *Middlemarch*, *Felix Holt*, and *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot also uses a self-giving marriage of two indi-

viduals who complement each other—outside of culturally assigned roles—to suggest the kind of partnership that dismantles debilitating gender stereotypes. Acknowledging natural law over orthodox Christianity as the basis for moral laws, she posits, as new messiah, the whole of androgynous male and female in a self-sacrificing love, capable of transforming society.

Writing at the end of the twentieth century, Thomas Hardy reflects the mood of the late Victorians in his characters’ struggle between Christianity and Naturalism. He depicts not only Tess but also Angel Clare and Alec Stoke-d’Uverville as moving between Christianity and Agnosticism. Since Angel carries the most influence, in being an educated member of the gentry, his arguments against the articles of faith convince first Tess, then Alec, to abandon their religious beliefs. Only later, after his own year of suffering, does Angel realize that he condemned Tess, not from his Hellenistic beliefs but from the Christian beliefs that he had rejected. We hear Hardy’s tell-tale embellishment in Angel’s Victorian thoughts:

Having long discredited the old systems of mysticism, he now began to discredit the old appraisements of morality. He thought they wanted readjusting. Who was the moral man? Still more pertinently, who was the moral woman. The beauty or ugliness of a character lay...in its aims and impulses; its true history lay, not among things done, but among things willed. (Hardy 421)

Even though Angel had rejected Christianity for “Hellenic Paganism” (422), he had judged Tess on the basis of neither paganism nor Christian ideals but Old Testament laws. The demands of Tess’s family as well as the whims or convictions of her two lovers, acting on Tess’s self-imposed moral convictions (i.e., responsibility for her family’s troubles, guilt for Angel’s misery, etc.), act as a kind of fate, no less than her beauty, the letter sliding under the carpet, and the supposed significance of the d’Uverville ancestry, so that her efforts to do the right thing only work against her (as in, among others, her wedding-night confession to Angel, her decision to return to Alec, and her decision to destroy Alec). Hardy suggests that if the Victorians reject their outworn faith in Christianity for sci-

ence, they should adhere to a set of principles guided by Natural law, not Judeo-Christian laws.

Twentieth-century novelists, like Classical tragedians, obeyed the creation mandate in moving the novel toward moral introspection through image and structure, substituting multiple or stream-of-consciousness narrators for the chorus to reflect a culture coming full-circle from Fate to Darwinism. While Joseph Conrad, like Thomas Hardy, suggests the molding power of circumstances, he also uses the characters' choices to prove their culpability in their fate. In *The Heart of Darkness*, we see Conrad's tell-tale embellishment in the idea that even though "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (Conrad 66) and the "wilder-ness had...got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation" (64), Kurtz chooses each step of his journey no less than does Oedipus or Faustus. Similarly, while economic circumstances have robbed Ethan Hawley of wealth and status in Steinbeck's *The Winter of our Discontent*,

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he acknowledges—in Steinbeck's tell-tale embellishment—his own power to determine his fate in consciously seeking the tarot-card predictions (in spite of violent physical/psychical resistance) and in consciously carrying them out (Steinbeck 46). He admits yielding to the "dark jury" of the mind (88).

While Seeveld considers such embellishments "unthinkable" in drama (110), playwrights Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams added stage directions and character descriptions to guide not

only directors but also readers in their thinking. Arthur Miller's addition of the narrator's voice in *The Crucible*, like that of Tennessee Williams in *The Glass Menagerie*, guides readers' political and religious opinions. Throughout *The Crucible*, which traces the motives and destructive effects of a contrived Salem witch hunt, the narrator conveys the dangers of an autocratic society, stating that "all organization is and must be grounded on the idea of exclusion and prohibition" (7). Applying the theocratic practices of Salem to those of particular contemporary governments, the narrator tells us, "A political policy is equated with moral right, and objection to it with diabolical malevolence" (34). Today, he might say the opposite.

III. The Power of Literature to Elicit Response

Scriptural literary models and obedience to the creation mandate imply a third argument in favor of literature: its capacity to elicit confessions about the human condition. The narrator's voice does what paint, sculpture, and music do not necessarily do: it evokes the reader's confession of fear, longing, guilt, and remedy.

While the other arts give an emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual awareness of the human condition, only literature, with its use of language, forces readers into a monologue or dialogue on human suffering and a remedy. For example, Salvador Dali uses color, shadow, and perspective in his painting of Christ on a cross suspended above the world to suggest Christ's suffering in isolation for an indifferent humanity. Taking the reader confessionally further than Dali's painting, Steinbeck's novel *The Winter of Our Discontent* forces readers to admit, with narrator Ethan Allen Hawley, their own participation in Christ's isolated suffering—the only solution to society's ills. At first, moral protagonist Ethan Hawley identifies with the "loneliness of the Crucified" (36); but when he consciously embraces a Darwinist worldview for wealth and power, he declares, "I have designed an Easter hat...A simple, off-the-face crown of thorns in gold with real ruby droplets on the forehead" (98).

Similarly, Eliot del Borgo's musical composition "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" does not take the audience as far confessionally as Dylan Thomas' poem that inspired it. While Del

Borgo's contrasts of pitch and harmony suggest the emotional experience of watching a parent die, the dramatic monologue in Dylan Thomas's villanelle forces readers to participate at every level of being. The persona's pleading with his father to "rage" against death forces readers to plead as well, as they recognize life's heightened significance at the moment of death, death's certainty, the parent's mystery, the parent's significance as blessing-giver or "curse"-giver, and failure of parent-child love in a broken world. Through the persona's pleading through the examples of four kinds of men ("wise," "good," "wild," "grave") who rage against death, readers face their own fecklessness, regret, recklessness, joylessness, and general misuse of life.

As literature—particularly read literature—leads to those confessed insights, the impact is immediate, since reading plays, according to D.J. Carlile, writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, "allows one to savor the language and emotion more intimately" than seeing them performed on the stage or onscreen: "Away from the exigencies of the stage the characters come to life on the printed page, and Williams' precise stage directions [often altered or minimized by directors] put the reader into the scene"(6). Further, since literature "does not need to be spoken, danced, played, or enacted to attain final symbolical objectification" (Seerveld 106), it allows the reader to be free of a pace and critical approach imposed by a director.

IV. Literature's Capacity to Provide Interpretive Tools in an Image-Driven Culture

In a more overpowering way than novels, poems, and even performed drama, electronically delivered productions impose their worldview and language on national thought. Under their impact, students need the interpretive tools gained in literary study. Without an understanding of literary conventions, archetypes, images, narrative voices, and literary techniques, students miss the complexity of powerful images and events in the confusing entertainment of *Barton Fink*, *Magnolia*, *American Beauty*, *Oh Brother Where Art Thou*, *The Hours*, and *Narnia* or the pallid amusement of the 2005 production of *Pride and Prejudice*, to name a few. They also miss an understanding of their history and

culture. As Henry Zylstra reminds us, "Knowledge thus transmuted is literature, is humane letters, and should be the principal means to education" (17).

However, various cultural changes have demoted literature from its position as a "principal means to education" to one more form of entertainment or, worse, an outmoded academic assignment. In Susan Sontag's 1965 definition of "taste as the paramount contemporary aesthetic principle" (qtd. in Ozick 4), Sontag "nearly single-handedly...altered the culture" from Mathew Arnold's "the best that has been thought and said" to "Whatever" (4). Further changes—the democratization of language, in the 1960s, to debunk a prescriptive study of grammar as a political tool of the social elite; the opening of the literary canon in the 1970s and the subsequent trivializing of canonical literature on the assumption of its privileged and politically controlling position; the relegating of truth to critics' interpretations and public opinion in the 1970s and 1980s; the relegating of literature to one of many cultural artifacts in the 1980s and therefore of its having no greater importance than laundry lists or classroom/online publications; and the de-centering of God and therefore of any author's authority in literary works in the late twentieth century—have demoted literature from truth-bearer to part of an infinite text of conflicting discourses and ideologies, capable of multiple contradictory interpretations, and often read in small pre-digested, on-line bites by busy students.

Without guidance among economically determined cultural images and among electronic texts that plagiarize and combine older texts to produce new texts, considered equal in value to every other text, the young audience loses its need of substance in the salvo of explosive visual/discursive entertainment. As watching replaces reading and study of literature, and as predigested, reproduced, and unauthorized on-line texts replace literary works, culture follows the most evocative images or the multiple but uninformed voices of its members, with no basis for making distinctions between trivia and truth, between the narrator/language of the meteoric *Da Vinci Code* and those of *St. Matthew* or *Middlemarch*.

Besides the literary conventions and forms that guide interpretation, "the print media allow for

self-pacing and dialogue in comprehending an argument or in reflecting on an image”; by contrast, “visual media [“film and television”] impose their pace on the viewer and, in emphasizing images rather than words, invite not conceptualization but dramatization” (Bell 108), or imitation. Captivated by sound and visual images that construct and impose their reality on viewers, students mistake parody for reality and accept film adaptations for the work itself. For example, the 2000 film version of *Mansfield Park*, inspired by Jane Austen’s 1815 novel, *Mansfield Park*, alters the focus and content to make a political statement. Sir Thomas, recast as a nefarious rapist and torturer of his Jamaica-plantation slaves, bears responsibility for the family hypocrisy and decay, redefining Fanny Price’s struggle against the smug culture at the Park, as if the original struggle were insignificant and every English landlord guilty of atrocities. Students need literary works as balancing correctives.

Contemporary feminist poet Adrienne Rich also recognizes humanity’s ongoing need of art in a culture whose technological advances still do not fulfill our complexity of human needs. She writes,

Our senses are whip-driven by a feverish new pace of technological change. The activities that mark us as human, though, don’t begin, exist in, [or] end by such a calculus. They pulse, fade out, and pulse again in ...the elemental humus of ... art ... [which] can teach us if we desire it. In fact, for Westerners to look back at 1900 is to come full face upon ourselves in 2000, still trying to grapple with the hectic power of capitalism and technology, the displacement of social will into the accumulating of money and things....We have been here all along” (9).

V. The Complexity of Literature

That cultural need of literature leads to a fifth argument for the literature requirement: its complexity, not only its multidimensionality but also the symbolic nature of literary writing and the religious nature of literary criticism. Seerveld distinguishes literature from the other arts by its “modally indeterminate locus” (110). Using the theory of modal spheres developed by Herman Dooyeweerd to suggest the multidimensionality and unity of creation,

Seerveld explains that like the other modalities, aesthetics as well as each branch of aesthetics incorporates and reflects the functions of all the other modalities (i.e., numeric, spacial, kinematic, physical, bio-organic, psychic, technical, aesthetic, lingual, analytic, social, economic, juridical, ethical, confessional), resulting in coherence and unity (100). While each branch of aesthetics also corresponds to a particular modality (specifically, lyric poetry to the confessional modal sphere, dramatic poetry to the juridical modal sphere etc.), only narrative cannot be limited, or shown to correspond, to any one modality (100). Literature’s “modally indeterminate locus” (location, place, points) is evident in its using narrative to dramatize, examine, and critique any particular theory (philosophic, economic, political, educational, scientific, etc.), its implying a confessional stance, and its bringing the reader to a confession of insights about that theory.

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To explain the nature of literary language, Seerveld distinguishes literary from non-literary writing by referring to literary writing as “symbol” and non-literary as “signal” (106). When writing becomes the art of literature, “it loses its signal referential quality [it no longer refers to “things, events, or conditions”](88) as does history or theology; “doubling back on itself, ...the writing serves

directly as symbolical objectifications of meanings perceived" (106); that is, it refers "not to things but only to conceptions of things" (88). Simply put, literary writing symbolizes concepts.

For example, in Dickens' *Hard Times*, the "spiral staircase" mentally constructed by Mrs. Sparsit symbolizes more than moral and social ascent and descent. Not only does it symbolize Mrs. Sparsit's anticipation of Louisa Bounderby's fall to moral/social ruin, leaving Mr. Bounderby free to marry and raise the status of Mrs. Sparsit, but it also objectifies the perceived values of Utilitarian philosophy, in which moral codes are based on expediency, and worth is determined by status, market value, and outward propriety. Literature's multi-pronged focus and symbolic language make it essential in educating the complex image-bearers of God.

As crux of education, any literature course involves literary criticism. Since literature "has suffered" from "secularization" (Seerveld 138), in which "the sting and meanness of the Deceiver" has "evolved...to a rather sentimentally appreciated, colorful malcontent..." (138-139), Seerveld urges "an out-spokenly Christian literary critical confrontation" because "if we do not judge it in the name of Christ, it will judge us..." (130). Calling the work of literary criticism the "menial priestly service of giving cups of cold water to others in Christ's name," he sees it as a way not only to prevent the Christian's being judged by the literature but also as a way to "preserve both the humble tentativeness and vigorous normativity... becoming to Christian labor" (129). He tells us to study contemporary works "hard" in order "to know where the enemy is, the dis-believers' weak points, what the unbeliever fears most, ...what any God-estranged person is mistakenly getting at, but also how in God's name to help such a neighbor" (139).

Seerveld conveys the seriousness of the Christian-college task when he says, "only if the Christian community can teach one to expect, recognize, and handle the religious issues at stake in ...all literature...shall it have truly led youth in the fear of the Lord and not prostituted the office of leadership..." (139). Seerveld stands in a long tradition of writers who have defended literature, from Plato (insisting on its moral guidance), Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus to C. S. Lewis, Susan

Gallagher, Roger Lundin, and, more recently, Mark Edmundson (*Why Read?*), Mark Roche (*Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century*), and Cynthia Ozick (*The Din in the Head*). As students study and apply various theories—from traditional and new critical to new historicist and cultural—they need Scriptural lens through which to examine a theory's presuppositions and through which to appropriate that theory.

A Reformed Interpretation of Literature:

As a new teacher starting on that wonderful odyssey, I attended a lecture by Nicholas Barker, then Professor of English at Covenant College, speaking at a Christian Schools International conference. His lecture distinguished literature (what Longinus would call "sublime") from popular fiction on the basis of several criteria: its universality (or as Roche would say, its conveying of the universal through the particular [26]); its comprehensive scope; its challenge of cultural values, beliefs, and institutions; its capacity to take the reader to higher levels of consciousness; and its being a work of art, authentic in form and language. His ideas, which remain a helpful guide, take us back to the grand narrative of Scripture for what *is* a universal, comprehensive understanding of the human experience, for what challenges cultural ideologies, for a higher consciousness of language and the human predicament, and for patterns of literary art.

That guide suggests an approach that, along with other theoretical interpretations, gets at the human condition and a particular culture. Certainly James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* develop their protagonists not only as the image of God (in their complexity and capacity to interpret, morally evaluate, and shape experience), but also as fallen (in their arrogant exploitation and dismissal of others). Both protagonists seek fulfillment and meaning—whether through academics and art, as in Stephen's case, or through scoring in sports and sex, as in Harry's case. Both protagonists plunge to failure and disillusionment: Stephen finds he can sustain neither his family's aesthetic and intellectual reformation nor his own asceticism and salvation; and Harry can find no mate or job that allows him simply to be the irresponsible, godlike

creature he aspires to be. Finally, both characters seek not only expiation for their failure but also a means of transcendence. Stephen turns unsuccessfully to the Church, then to academia, and finally to art, choosing a life of alienation as art's priest in order to transcend the cultural and familial "nets" (Joyce 177) that bind him. Harry runs back and forth between wife Janice and lover Ruth before shucking both and running toward that transcendent "[S]omething" (Updike 110) that will recognize his greatness and absolve him of all responsibility to his mates and children. As Updike's narrator explains in a tell-tale embellishment, "Harry has no taste for the dark, tangled, visceral aspect

Following their [the characters'] cycles, we watch ourselves, the power of our own cultural molding, the addictive folly of our own success myths.

of Christianity, the going through quality of it.... He lacks the mindful will to walk the straight line of a paradox" (203). In the protagonists' final triumphs, we anticipate the pattern that the writers have drawn: temporary exhilaration, followed by failure, guilt, self-hatred, rationalization, and a new search for transcendence.

These works show us ourselves and our attempts to save ourselves through cultural ideologies. James Joyce fought the philistinism of 1920s Dublin with the empty promises of Modernism. John Updike fought, while Harry Angstrom tried to fulfill, a 1950s American ideal—the womanizing life of jocks and aggressive and materially successful males. While some readers see Stephen and Harry as victims or predators or survivors or heroes of individual freedom, others interpret the works as intersections of conflicting ideologies that are culturally determined and institutionally interpreted. While we can support these disparate interpretations with the texts, we also see that

two gifted men have missed a fulfilling life by arrogantly seeking godhead in lawlessness and self-deception. Following their cycles, we watch ourselves, the power of our own cultural molding, the addictive folly of our own success myths.

Since God commands us to develop his world, which includes literary genres and theories as conveyors of truth, and since he calls us to disciple all people, we continue to defend literature as an essential truth-bearer and requirement for Christian higher education.

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